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ABSTRACT

US-based research showed that individuals rely on apolitical cues, like cars or clothes, to form expectations about others' political preferences. This article uses the concept of 'political-cultural linking' — producing inferences about others from the perceived alignment between apolitical and political preferences — observing this behavior in Italy, a multi-party European context, through a survey vignette experiment on food preferences. We find that respondents associate vegan/ethnic foods with the political left and carnivore foods with the right. Moreover, ideological self-placement, news media exposure, and cultural consumption are associated with respondents' willingness to do political-cultural linking. Finally, we observe that this behavior affects the propensity to interact and converse with others, with implications for social distance and political polarization dynamics.



KEYWORDS


Political stereotypes; political ideology; political conversation; survey vignette experiment; Italian politics

Introduction

Imagine Max is at a party. Alex, a loose acquaintance of Max, approaches him, starting an 'am-I-right' cheap chat complaining about the right-wing government. Max now possesses an important piece of information to infer Alex's political ideology, and he could decide to start a conversation disclosing his political views or changing the subject.

Few people would kill the pleasant mood of a social gathering by starting a conflictual political conversation, so Alex must have good reasons to believe Max shares, at least partially, his views. But what led Alex to this assumption? He could have thought that being at the same party, having common friends, and being the same age, gender, and from the same city, Max was likely to be politically compatible. But Alex may also have used different clues to infer Max's political preferences. He could have looked at the bright color of Max's shirt, the way he wears his long beard or the fact that he chose to fill his plate with Korean-Mexican vegan tapas instead of chicken wings and bacon strips.

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Research established that individuals indeed use cues such as preferences for certain TV shows, music, drinks, sports, and brands, to infer others' partisanship, ideology, or issue positions when explicit information about these is not available (Carlson & Settle 2022; Deichert 2019; Hiaeshutter-Rice, Neuner & Soroka 2023; Lee 2021; Settle 2018). Moreover, individuals adjust their behavior and propensity to interact with others according to the content of these inferences (Carlson & Settle 2022; Lee 2021). Yet, only a few studies observed this behavior outside the US (see for example Ouellet & Tremblay-Antoine 2024).

This stream of research has extensively documented the attributes triggering these inferences (Deichert 2019; Ouellet & Tremblay-Antoine 2024) – with conservatives inferred to be pickup-driving black coffee-drinkers and liberals inferred to be electric car-driving latte-drinkers-, but no study has yet systematically investigated the personal characteristics predicting a higher personal propensity to engage in these inferences, and therefore to perceive political and apolitical traits as intrinsically associated. Finally, the behavioral consequences of these political inferences and their relevance to the dynamics of social distance and political polarization have been severely overlooked (for a notable exception see Lee 2021), especially outside the US.

In this study, we fill these gaps by conducting an original survey vignette experiment in Italy to investigate the content, determinants, and consequences of political inferences from apolitical cues, a manifestation of what we will indicate as 'politicultural linking' (PL).

Our survey experiment asks participants to guess the political preferences of a person from different food choices – veganism, carnivorousness, ethnic, and traditional – to test whether these are significantly perceived as associated with political preferences (i.e. the content of PL). Moreover, we investigate the characteristics associated with the prototypical 'politicultural linker' identifying the predictors of this behavior. Finally, we delve into the consequences of PL observing its association with the propensity to interact and discuss politics with others.

We conducted our study in Italy: an unstable multi-party European context, where party labels, leaders, and positions are quite unstable over time, as well as the strategic alliances among them (Emanuele & Chiaramonte 2020). Moreover, while in the US partisanship and ideology are strongly sorted (Lelkes 2016), in Italy we witness both major parties explicitly refusing any ideological placement on the left-right spectrum – such as the Five Star Movement (Cavazza, Colloca & Roccato 2022) – and others merging multiple ideological heritages – such as the Democratic Party, incorporating both the communist and the Christian democratic heritages (Ceron & Negri 2017). The fluidity of its party system and the complicated intertwining of ideology and partisanship make Italy a challenging context to test the external validity of results found in the US and motivate the observation of both inferences based on ideology (i.e. left vs right) and

partisanship (i.e. party choice), enriching a stream of research that has hitherto mostly focused on the latter (see Scaduto 2024).

Theoretical framework and hypotheses

Introducing politicultural linking

The present work specifically deals with inferences about political ideology and partisanship based on observed food consumption choices. To study these, we use the concept of ‘politicultural linking’ (PL), defined as ‘the production of inferences about others’ political or apolitical characteristics based on the [perceived] association between these’ (Scaduto 2024). The main contribution of this conceptualization is arguing that inferences between political traits (e.g.: partisanship, ideology, issue positions, candidate preferences) and apolitical traits (e.g.: sociodemographic traits, personality traits, lifestyle preferences) are the manifestation of an individual tendency to perceive political and apolitical attributes as associated.

Given this definition, PL encompasses both political inferences from apolitical cues (e.g.: inferring that a pick-up driver is a conservative) and apolitical inferences from political cues (e.g.: assuming a left-winger practices yoga). However, our investigation will deal with political inferences from apolitical cues and will focus on two specific manifestations of PL: inferences about either ideology (*Ideological PL*) or partisanship (*Partisan PL*) from food preferences.

PL adds a series of additional features to previous conceptualizations (see Scaduto 2024). It extends the idea of political stereotyping (Ahler & Sood 2018; Busby et al. 2021) by accounting for alternative inferential strategies, like projection (e.g.: assuming that someone sharing my partisan affiliation will share my food tastes as well) and counter-projection (e.g.: assuming that an out-partisan will not share my food tastes). Most importantly for our scopes, it explicitly includes lifestyle preferences – so far neglected by other conceptualizations (Busby et al. 2021; Myers 2023) – as one of the possible apolitical objects of the inference. It also incorporates the concepts of ‘partisan cultural stereotypes’ (Deichert 2019), ‘everyday partisan stereotypes’ (Lee 2021), and ‘politically sorted content’ (Settle 2018). Yet, these latter concepts focus on the content of the inferences (e.g.: electric cars are perceived as a signal of progressivism while pickups as a signal of conservatism) and are used in studies mapping the shared ideological or partisan perceptions of certain apolitical items. PL instead explicitly frames the production process of these inferences. To further clarify this distinction, consider this example. Inferring one’s political preferences from the cars they drive is something that, especially in the US context, is very common because of the shared ideological perceptions around pickups and Priuses (Hetherington & Weiler 2018; Lee 2021). Performing the same inferences from one’s name (Carlson & Settle 2022) is a way less common

behavior. Studies using the concepts of ‘partisan cultural stereotypes’ and ‘everyday partisan stereotypes’ explore how much certain items drive ideological or partisan perceptions. Yet, it might be interesting to also observe which kinds of people, and under which circumstances, engage in cars or name-based inferences, therefore focusing on the possible explanations behind the behavior of PL. This behavioral focus is contemplated by the definition of PL, allowing us to test hypotheses regarding the personal characteristics predicting it.

Where do associations between political and apolitical traits originate from?

Where do the mental associations on which PL is based originate from? We now outline five mechanisms potentially engendering the associations between political and apolitical traits.

The most straightforward mechanism is just the observation of an alignment between political and apolitical traits. Several studies observed this alignment in multiple fields, from music to movies, art, humor, and food (Carney et al. 2008; DellaPosta, Shi & Macy 2015; Hetherington & Weiler 2018; Rogers 2022; Schoenmueller, Netzer & Stahl 2023).¹ Individuals observe and extract meaning from attributes they see co-occurring in people (Cerulo, Leschziner & Shepherd 2021; Hilton & Von Hippel 1996), generating ‘social classificatory schemes’ (Bourdieu 1984, p. 175). The observation of co-occurrences forms and strengthens the mental association between the co-occurring objects, a process that has been called ‘semantic cognition’ (Goldberg & Stein 2018) or the ‘nonconscious detection of covariation’ (Hilton & Von Hippel 1996, p. 244).

Yet, the path from observation to associations may not be straightforward. Goldberg and Stein (2018, p. 906) claimed that ‘humans are biased to impute associations in others’ behaviors even when such associations are merely random noise’. Moreover, the observation is influenced by cognitive schemes (Hogg & Reid 2006) and social relationships (Cowan & Baldassarri 2018). Bordalo et al. (2016) also suggest that rather than at the correlations per se, we often look at how certain correlations distinguish one group from other relevant groups, an idea stemming from Kahneman and Tversky’s representativeness heuristic (Kahneman & Tversky 1972; see also Ahler & Sood 2022 for a discussion applied to political associations). For example, most voters of the Green Party may not love ethnic cuisine, but if they are over-represented among ethnic cuisine lovers, an association could nonetheless arise.

The second mechanism concerns the fact that the consumption of a cultural item may be interpreted as a politically motivated choice (i.e. an act of political consumerism, Micheletti 2003), signaling support for an issue position, which is

¹Notably, this alignment, labeled as ‘lifestyle politics’ (DellaPosta, Shi & Macy 2015), ‘preference polarization’ (Schoenmueller, Netzer & Stahl 2023), or ‘politicultural sorting’ (Rogers 2022), has also been observed in Italy (Cavazza & Corbetta 2016), a fact further motivating our empirical investigation. A discussion on the possible causes of this alignment falls beyond the scope of our work. We refer the interested reader to the works of DellaPosta, Shi and Macy (2015) and Mutz and Rao (2018).

then associated with a political party – or ideology – through associative issue ownership (Walgrave, Lefevere & Tresch 2012). For example, as we will discuss, being vegan could be interpreted as an act of political consumerism signaling support for environmental issues (Raggiotto, Mason & Moretti 2018), that can be associated with left-wing parties (Walgrave, Lefevere & Tresch 2012).

The third mechanism concerns the role of the media in the formation of collective meaning and in structuring collective stereotypes. Therefore, associations can also arise from media representations of political groups, such as partisans or ideologues (Rahn & Cramer 1996). Media outlets emphasize partisan differences in terms of sociodemographic traits and lifestyle preferences giving more relevance to more extreme, consistent, and polarized politicians and partisans (Levendusky 2023; see also Trepte & Loy 2017 for a discussion based on Social Identity Theory). Consistently, news media exposure may lead to bigger misperceptions regarding out-partisans' traits (Ahler & Sood 2018). Moreover, the success of infotainment programs, mixing political and cultural elements and making extensive use of partisan cultural stereotypes (Deichert 2019), could contribute to structuring the associations between political and apolitical traits. For example, in satirical shows in Italy Five-Star Movement supporters are often depicted as dressed informally, while Go Italy supporters are depicted wearing suits (TerzoSegreto 2015). Exposure to such representations could engender an association between outfits and voting preferences.

Associations can originate from observing political élites' cultural preferences or cultural élites political leanings too, using élites as the embodiment of mental prototypes (Ahler & Sood 2022; Deichert 2019). For example, Taylor Swift's endorsement of a Democratic candidate led the American public to associate being a 'Swiftie' with Democratic partisanship (Deichert 2019). Moreover, social media displays of 'gastropopulism' (Demuru 2021) by right-wing politicians, as we will argue, may contribute to strengthening the association between traditional food preferences and conservatism. This constitutes our fourth mechanism.

Finally, we should also consider the role of projection, namely using one's own co-occurrence to structure the associations through which inferences are produced. As Ames (2004), p. 341) stated: 'When I find a new acquaintance shares my love for an obscure comedian, I may extend myself as a template and assume he also shares my political view'. If someone is both a meat-lover and a conservative, they could project conservatism to people sharing their taste for meat.

There are therefore at least five ways through which mental associations are engendered. Yet, this does not necessarily lead to using these associations to produce inferences. As suggested by studies on political discussion, cultural preferences may work as a device for *signaling* (MacKuen 1990) and *detecting* (Carlson & Settle 2022) political preferences, just like Bourdieu (1984) suggested they worked for social class. Carlson and Settle (2022), p. 82) explained that such

propensity is not evenly spread: ‘the benefits of signalling [political preferences] depend on the individual’s tolerance for talking about politics, the distribution of political views in the environment, and on the ability or desire of others to interpret signals of varying ambiguity’. Some people just want to avoid political interactions, particularly if they expect these interactions to be conflictual (Carlson & Settle 2022; Cowan & Baldassarri 2018; MacKuen 1990). Accordingly, they may resort to every cue available to *detect* others’ political preferences, from clothes (Deichert 2019) to cars (Lee 2021) or even names (Carlson & Settle 2022). As we will show, food preferences fully belong in this list.

Food as a field of cultural consumption

We observe PL on food preferences for two reasons. First, the abundance of evidence observing the alignment between food and political preferences across multiple contexts and disciplines. Among others, it has been observed by sociologists in Finland (Purhonen & Heikkilä 2017), psychologists in Italy (Guidetti et al. 2022, 2023), and marketing scholars in the US (Buechner et al. 2022). Second, food consumption is universal and uniformly spread, therefore we expect most people to possess similar knowledge regarding food. We focus on two dimensions that research suggests to be associated with political preferences: the vegan/carnivore and traditional/ethnic dimensions.

Veganism is associated with environmentalism (Raggiotto, Mason & Moretti 2018) and the ownership of environmental issues in most national contexts belongs to left-wing parties (Walgrave, Lefevere & Tresch 2012). Notably, in Italy, both the associations between veganism and environmentalism (Raggiotto, Mason & Moretti 2018) and the ownership of left-wing parties of environmental issues (Biancalana & Ladini 2022) have been observed, therefore, based on the associative issue ownership mechanism, we state the following hypothesis.

H1a. Vegan food preferences are associated with left-wing ideology and a preference for left-wing parties.

On the other hand, carnism was observed to correlate with conservatism (Dhont & Hodson 2014; Rosenfeld, Rothgerber & Tomiyama 2023), with right-wing authoritarians holding more negative opinions about vegans (Judge & Wilson 2019; MacInnis & Hodson 2017; Monteiro et al. 2017). This would favor the observation of an alignment and subsequently engender associations through direct observation. Moreover, multiple studies have highlighted the frequent display of meat-based dishes in Matteo Salvini’s online communications (Demuru 2021; Stagi, Benasso & Guzzetti 2022), which would favor associations through the observation of political élites (the fourth mechanism). This leads us to the following hypothesis.

H1b. *Carnivore food preferences are associated with right-wing ideology and a preference for right-wing parties.*

Regarding the traditional-ethnic dimension, conservatives have been observed to show higher levels of food neophobia (Guidetti et al. 2022) – the reluctance to eat unfamiliar food –, to be less able to overcome it (Guidetti, Ferretti & Cavazza 2023), and to prefer food consumption experiences perceived as ‘local’ rather than ‘global’ (Buechner et al. 2022; Purhonen & Heikkilä 2017). This is consistent with research in political psychology showing that left-wing political ideology correlates with openness to new experiences in multiple contexts, including Italy (Vecchione et al. 2011).

Notably, both evidence on the relationship between food neophobia and political ideology (Guidetti et al. 2022, 2023) and between openness to new experiences and left-wing ideology (Caprara et al. 2006; Vecchione et al. 2011) have been collected in the Italian context, favoring the direct observation of correlations. In addition, the political debate about migration in Italy aligns with the ideological left-right division (Magistro & Wittstock 2021), possibly shaping the perceptions of people engaging in ‘globally’- rather than ‘locally’-framed activities through associative issue ownership. Finally, studies again showed the tendency of right-wing populists, particularly in Italy, to display a strong preference for traditional cuisine, and loathe foreign dishes (Demuru 2021; Stagi, Benasso & Guzzetti 2022), again favoring associations through the observation of political élites. This leads us to the following hypotheses:

H1c. *Ethnic food preferences are associated with left-wing political ideology and a preference for left-wing parties.*

H1d. *Traditional food preferences are associated with right-wing political ideology and a preference for right-wing parties.*

Detecting the detector: who is the Politicultural Linker?

Once assessed whether individuals engage in PL in the field of food, we also aim to assess if ‘the ability or desire to interpret signals of varying ambiguity’ (MacKuen 1990; also cited in, p. 81; Carlson & Settle 2022, p. 82) to detect political preferences are indeed associated with certain individual characteristics. This section discusses which characteristics we build our hypotheses around.

To detect political preferences from cultural preferences, it is necessary to recognize partisanship and ideology as valid categories through which social actors can be sorted (Trepte & Loy 2017). Consider the five mechanisms outlined

previously explaining how associations may arise. People refusing ideological self-placement will deem ideology as less salient, therefore the observation, memorization, and retrieval of correlations are hindered by their reduced interest in gathering information about others' ideological preferences. Moreover, since the subject has no ideology to project, they cannot use their own co-occurrences to produce associations between political and cultural preferences, hindering projection.

Italy has been described as a strongly ideologically polarized country (Dalton 2021) where ideology drives group consciousness and cognitive schemes (Vegetti & Širinić 2019). Simultaneously, however, Italy witnessed a significant decline in people's willingness to express an ideological identity (Azzolini, Baldassarri & Segatti 2023), leading to a situation where 'social representations of left and right in politics remain alive, but they are not well' (Cavazza, Colloca & Roccato 2022, p. 14). Such heterogeneity leads to a convenient context for our investigation, leading us to our second hypothesis.

H2. People placing themselves on the left-right ideological dimension are more willing to infer others' political preferences from their food consumption choices compared with people who refuse to place themselves.²

Notwithstanding the instability of the party context, partisanship has nonetheless been observed to work as a social identity in Italy (Bankert, Ponte & Huddy 2023). Partisans are interested in categorizing people as in-group /out-group members (Huddy 2001), to limit interactions with the out-group. People with high levels of affective polarization are stronger partisans and thus possess bigger misperceptions regarding out-partisans (Ahler & Sood 2018), which leads to expecting interactions with them to be unpleasant (Renström, Bäck & Carroll 2021). Loathing out-partisans implies recognizing implicitly the social meaning of partisan affiliation thus, for specular reasons as those depicted previously for ideology, we expect affective polarization to structure the associations fostering the mechanisms of observation of correlations and social projection. Compared with a wide set of other countries, Italy has been observed to be significantly above the average level of AP computed cross-nationally (Torcal & Comellas 2022). This leads us to our third hypothesis.

H3. People showing higher levels of affective polarization are more willing to infer others' ideology and party preferences from their food consumption choices.

²In the preregistration ideological placement was considered a control variable.

We expect news media exposure to structure associations through most of the mechanisms outlined in our framework. First, trivially, high exposure to news media implies higher exposure to those kinds of partisan news channels and infotainment programs emphasizing apolitical partisan differences (Levendusky 2023), as previously discussed. Moreover, news media exposure makes people more aware of the preferences of political élites. High exposure to news media is also associated with the ability to connect issues with parties (Kleinnijenhuis & Walter, 2014), thus favoring associative issue ownership. Finally, it has also been shown to be connected with bigger misperceptions regarding out-partisans' apolitical traits and, more generally, with affective polarization (Ahler & Sood 2018; Padró-Solanet & Balcells 2022), therefore facilitating the observation of correlations. This leads us to our fourth hypothesis.

H4. People showing higher exposure to news media are more willing to infer others' ideology and party preferences from their food consumption choices.

Finally, we should also consider the role of cultural consumption. Higher levels of cultural consumption lead to greater knowledge of the specific characteristics of cultural items, broadening the possibility of using those as signals. This process could unfold through different mechanisms: first, when cultural items are inherently political, their consumption can signal support for a specific issue. Knowing that Lady Gaga's songs support homosexual relationships allows one to use 'liking Lady Gaga' to infer 'support for LGBTQ+ issues' and thus 'left-wing ideology', coherently with the associative issue ownership mechanism. Knowing the content of Lady Gaga's songs – trivially associated with cultural consumption – is a necessary condition to perform such inferences. Second, awareness regarding the political composition of consumers associated with a cultural subfield allows the observation of correlations. For example, people who like movies directed by Wes Anderson have been observed to lean toward the political left (Rawlings & Childress 2023) but to be aware of this, one needs to go watch 'Grand Budapest Hotel' at the movie theater and eavesdrop on the conversations in the queue. Third, knowing a singer's (cultural élite) political preferences could affect associations similarly to knowing a politician's (political élite) music tastes, as we discussed in the case of Taylor Swift (Deichert 2019). Finally, higher levels of cultural consumption could be associated with greater exposure to stereotypical representations of partisans and cultural élites portrayed in the media, contributing to structure associations through media exposure. People do not need to be political junkies to watch 'Saturday Night Live' or 'Modern Family', but by doing it, they will be exposed to such representations. This leads us to our fifth hypothesis.

H5. People showing higher levels of cultural consumption are more willing to infer others' ideology and party preferences from their food consumption choices.

The social consequences of politicocultural linking

Overall, cross-group interactions are expected to generate anxiety, and the usual response is to avoid them (Stephan 2014). This holds for political discussions, especially for conflict-avoidant, socially anxious, or politically unengaged people (Carlson & Settle 2022). Whether the motivations reside in affective polarization (Renström, Bäck & Carroll 2021), the willingness to avoid conflicts overall (Carlson & Settle 2022; Cowan & Baldassarri 2018), misperceptions regarding the political out-group (Ahler & Sood 2018; Lee 2021), lack of interest, or fear of appearing ignorant (Klar & Krupnikov 2016), PL could be used as a tool to perform a quick selection of the people to keep socially close or distant (Lee 2021).

Sociologists have traditionally studied social distance as the behavioral reactions to negative attitudes toward certain people or groups (Bogardus 1947), such as discomfort in having out-group members as neighbors, close friends, or in-laws. Recently, affective polarization scholars have used these behavioral manifestations as either a measure or a consequence of affective polarization (Druckman & Levendusky 2019; Iyengar, Sood & Lelkes 2012; Kekkonen et al. 2022), showing how the propensity to socially distance from the political out-group seems to measure a separate facet of polarization from the emotional component expressed by feelings thermometers. Accordingly, studies suggested an association between the propensity to engage in political inferences and the willingness to socially distance (Lee 2021). Inferring someone to be an out-partisan based on apolitical cues significantly decreases the willingness to have the target of the inference as a colleague, friend, or family member³ (Lee 2021). Moreover, the more severe the misperceptions of the apolitical traits of the political out-groups, the greater the tendency to socially distance from them (Ahler & Sood 2018).

Observing people deciding to distance themselves from others based on PL would lead us to expect self-reinforcing dynamics in the processes of political polarization. According to the 'Oil-spill model' (DellaPosta 2020), polarization unfolds by leading political opinions to align with a broader set of preferences, spilling over to cultural fields. If associations between political and cultural preferences arise through observation of correlations, these associations could then be used to select politically similar companions through PL. However, if political and cultural preferences are indeed aligned, co-ideologues and co-

³Notably, these questions recall the original social distance scale proposed by Bogardus (1933).

partisans are already more likely to share cultural preferences, thus PL would generate fewer cross-group contacts (e.g. a vegan left-winger would only decide to interact with vegans, expecting them to be politically compatible as well), inhibiting exposure to diversity, subsequently fostering the alignment in a self-fulfilling fashion.

Moreover, avoiding cross-group conversations increases the negative animus toward the political out-group (Levendusky & Stecula 2023). Thus, observing the social consequences of PL is crucial to understanding the processes that may lead ‘false polarization’ to become a self-fulfilling prophecy (Jost, Baldassarri & Druckman 2022). This leads us to our last two hypotheses:

H6. People are less prone to engage in personal interaction with individuals they infer to belong to a different political group based on apolitical cues.

H7. People hold more negative expectations regarding political conversations with individuals they infer to belong to a different ideological or partisan group based on apolitical cues.

Research design, data and methods

The choice to focus on the Italian case

We conducted our experiment on a representative sample of Italian respondents for theoretical and methodological reasons.

Theoretically, much of the research on political and apolitical traits has focused on the U.S (see Scaduto 2024), which limits the generalizability of findings. Italy, with its volatile multi-party system (Ceron & Negri 2017) and coalitions that blur ideological boundaries (Emanuele & Chiaramonte 2020), offers an interesting contrast. Despite ongoing affective polarization (Torcal & Comellas 2022), Italians have become less willing to express clear ideological identities (Azzolini, Baldassarri & Segatti 2023). Thus, while left-right political categories persist, their meaning has shifted, with apolitical features likely playing a role (Cavazza, Colloca & Roccato 2022).

Additionally, Italy allows us to ground our hypotheses not in the void, but in previous studies. Key research has already linked political and apolitical traits in Italy (Cavazza & Corbetta 2016), including studies on food preferences and political ideologies (Guidetti et al. 2022, 2023), veganism and environmentalism (Raggiotto, Mason & Moretti 2018), and the correlation between right-wing populism and traditional cuisine (Demuru 2021; Stagi, Benasso & Guzzetti 2022).

Methodologically, understanding political preferences alongside consumption choices requires more than language – it demands cultural awareness.

For instance, offering a dish like *risotto allo zafferano* could suggest regional political biases (e.g. Lombardy, historically right-leaning). Thus, the authors' familiarity with Italy's cultural and political context justifies the choice of Italy for this study.

Experimental setting and dependent variables

We tested our hypotheses through a pre-registered survey experiment conducted in April 2023 in Italy ($N = 1092$) through the opt-in panel 'Pollstar'. Quotas were applied to reach representativeness in gender, age, and geographical residence with the Italian population. Respondents were exposed to a vignette describing a situation where a person orders a fixed-price menu in a restaurant. The experimental stimulus concerns the menu selected. Five menus have been randomly assigned: basic (control group), vegan, carnivorous, ethnic, and traditional. The vignette is reported in [Figure 1](#).

We asked respondents where they would place the person on a 7-point ideological scale ranging from extreme-left to extreme-right, or to say 'I don't know', and to indicate which among the 7 major Italian parties the character would vote for, or to say 'I don't know'. Respondents were also asked on a 5-point Likert scale how likely they are to (1) accept the character's invitation to have coffee together and (2) expect a political conversation with the character to be a pleasant experience.

Static portion	<p><i>"Imagine you are having lunch at a restaurant offering five menus at a fixed price of 20 euros. Each menu includes a first course, a second course, and a side dish. The five menus are:</i></p> <p>Basic menu: <i>pasta with tomato sauce, baked flounder, and mixed salad.</i></p> <p>Vegan menu: <i>farro and quinoa salad, grilled tofu, and sautéed kale.</i></p> <p>Meat menu: <i>charcuterie board, grilled sausage, and baked potatoes with crispy bacon.</i></p> <p>Traditional menu: <i>trenette pasta with Ligurian pesto, eggplant parmigiana, and sautéed chicory with fava beans.</i></p> <p>Ethnic menu: <i>noodles in broth, moussaka, and frijoles with guacamole.</i></p> <p><i>As you think about which one to choose, you hear the person sitting at the table next to yours choosing the:</i></p>
Experimental stimulus	[Randomly repeats one of the menus reported above]

Figure 1. The experimental vignette.

To test H1a-H1d, we used the answers to the question regarding the ideological position of the character with 'I don't know' recoded as missing.

To test H2-H5, the answers on the inferred partisanship and ideology of the character have been recoded into two dummy variables, *Partisan PL* and *Ideological PL*, with 0 representing 'I don't know' and 1 representing any other answer. Therefore, these two dummy variables are equal to 1 when the respondent performs PL and 0 when they refuse to do so.

To test H6-H7, we recoded the answers regarding the likelihood of having coffee and expectations on the pleasantness of a political conversation with the character into two ordinal variables - *Interaction* and *Conversation* - with three categories (*Likely*, *Neither Likely nor Unlikely*, *Unlikely*).

Independent and control variables

Regarding the predictors of PL, we test H2 through respondents' ideological self-placement. We operationalize it in two ways. *Located* equals 1 if the respondent places themselves anywhere on the ideological spectrum, 0 if they instead refuse such a placement, answering they would be placed 'nowhere'. *Ideology* is a categorical variable with four levels: *Nowhere*, *Left*, *Center*, *Right*.

H3 is tested through *Affective Polarization*, operationalized through Wagner's (2021; but see also Torcal & Comellas 2022) 'spread-of-score' index, namely a standard deviation around the mean of the feeling thermometer scores toward the seven major Italian parties (see Supplementary Information section 2.3.1).

High news exposure equals one when respondents reported spending, on a normal day, at least ten minutes watching, reading, or listening to political and current affairs news, and 0 otherwise. We use this variable to test H4.

Finally, we test H5 through the *Cultural consumption* index. We computed this index by averaging the responses regarding the frequency of engaging in four cultural activities (going to the cinema, practicing an artistic activity, attending a live performance, visiting a cultural site) over the last year. For each activity, respondents could report engaging in them every day (recoded as 4), at least once a week (3), at least once a month (2), at least once in the last year (1), never in the last year (recoded as 0), or to not remember (0). The four items scaled well on a single dimension (Cronbach's alpha = .79), justifying the construction of such an index.

To test the hypotheses referring to the consequences of PL (H6-H7), we first used *Ideological PL* as the main independent variable to observe if being a political linker is associated with the willingness to interact/converse overall. Then, we focused on the subgroup of our sample that places themselves either on the left (0–4) or the right (6–10) of the political spectrum and has performed ideological PL placing the character either on the left or the right. For this sub-sample, we defined the variable *Perceived Out-group* as a dummy variable which equals 1 if respondents place the character in the vignette on the

opposite side of the political spectrum (e.g. the respondent places themselves on the left and the character on the right), zero when they place the character on their same side.

Finally, across the different models, we control for the number of parties known by the respondent (*Party knowledge* – namely the number of parties for which a feeling thermometer score was given rather than selecting ‘I don’t know’), interest in politics, and socio-demographic traits – age, gender, area of residence, possession of a university degree, perceived social position, and city dimension. In models of groups c and d (see [Table 2](#)), we also control for the ‘Big Five’ personality traits – agreeableness, extraversion, openness to new experiences, conscientiousness, and neuroticism (recorded and manipulated through the I-TIPI battery as done by Chiorri et al. 2015) – given their role in predicting the propensity to interact and engage in a political conversation with others (Gerber et al. 2012).

More details on questions and recoding of the variables discussed are available in Supplementary Information 2. Descriptive statistics on all the variables included in the models are reported in [Table 1](#).

Methods and model specifications

To investigate the content and directions of PL (H1a-H1d), we report descriptive tables concerning the distribution of the ideological collocation of the character

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of the variables in the sample.

Variable	Median (IQR)/n (per cent)	Variable	Median (IQR)/n (per cent)
<i>Partisan PL = 1</i>	610 (55.9 per cent)	<i>Aff. pol</i>	2.4 (1.3, 3.3)
<i>Ideological PL = 1</i>	605 (55.4 per cent)	<i>Ideologically located</i>	
<i>Interaction = 1</i>	743 (68.0 per cent)	<i>Not located</i>	230 (21.1 per cent)
<i>Conversation = 1</i>	653 (59.8 per cent)	<i>Located</i>	862 (78.9 per cent)
<i># Parties known</i>		<i>Ideology</i>	
0	19 (1.7 per cent)	<i>Center</i>	281 (25.7 per cent)
1	2 (0.2 per cent)	<i>Nowhere</i>	230 (21.1 per cent)
2	3 (0.3 per cent)	<i>Right</i>	315 (28.8 per cent)
3	5 (0.5 per cent)	<i>Left</i>	266 (24.4 per cent)
4	4 (0.4 per cent)	<i>Sex</i>	
5	20 (1.8 per cent)	<i>Male</i>	531 (48.6 per cent)
6	38 (3.5 per cent)	<i>Female</i>	561 (51.4 per cent)
7	1,001 (91.7 per cent)	<i>Age</i>	48 (38, 59)
<i>Political interest</i>		<i>Macroarea</i>	
<i>Low</i>	397 (36.4 per cent)	<i>Center</i>	300 (27.5 per cent)
<i>High</i>	695 (63.6 per cent)	<i>North</i>	415 (38.0 per cent)
<i>News Exposure</i>		<i>South</i>	377 (34.5 per cent)
<i>Low</i>	304 (27.8 per cent)	<i>Education</i>	
<i>High</i>	788 (72.2 per cent)	<i>Low</i>	680 (62.3 per cent)
<i>Index of cult. cons</i>	1.0 (0.5, 1.5)	<i>High</i>	412 (37.7 per cent)
<i>Conscientiousness</i>	3.0 (2.5, 3.5)	<i>Size of the city</i>	
<i>Openness</i>	2.0 (2.0, 2.5)	<i>Small</i>	710 (65.0 per cent)
<i>Agreeableness</i>	3.0 (2.0, 3.5)	<i>Big</i>	382 (35.0 per cent)
<i>Extraversion</i>	2.0 (1.0, 2.5)	<i>Placement on 0-10 social scale</i>	6.5 (6.0, 8.0)
<i>Neuroticism</i>	1.5 (1.0, 2.0)	<i>Perceived Out-group</i>	177 (45.4 per cent)*

*This variable has been defined only on a subgroup of the sample ($N = 385$), namely the portion that has done ideological PL (excluding those who perceived the character as centrist) and placed themselves either on the left (0–4) or on the right (6–10) of the ideological spectrum ($N = 385$)

of the vignette as inferred by the respondent. Additionally, we test the significance of our results through Mann-Whitney U tests and t-tests (see Supplementary Information 3).

The remaining hypotheses (H2-H7) are tested through regression models. We divided these models into four groups, whether the dependent variable is *Partisan PL* (group a), *Ideological PL* (group b), *Interaction* (group c), or *Conversation* (group d).

In detail, to identify the characteristics of the prototypical ‘politicultral linker’ (H2-H5), we estimated binary logistic regressions (models 1a-6a/1b-6b). To look at the consequences of PL (H6-H7), we first estimated ordinal logistic regressions on the whole sample to explore the association between *Ideological PL* and *Interaction/Conversation* (models 1c-3c/1d-3d). While these models allow us to exploit the numerosity of the whole sample, they are unable to test directional expectations. Thus, to directionally test H6 and H7, we restricted our analysis to the subsample of respondents ($N = 385$) satisfying two conditions: having self-placed themselves either on the left (0–4) or on the right (6–10) of the ideological spectrum and having done *Ideological PL* placing the character either on the left or the right. The suitability of this subsample for our analyses resides in the fact that each respondent is assumed to have a clearly defined ideological and partisan in-group and out-group. On this sub-sample, we estimated ordinal logistic regressions to observe the associations between *Perceived Out-group* and *Interaction/Conversation* (models 4c/4d). The variables included in each model are summarized in Table 2.

Results

You are what you eat: content and direction of politicultral linking

This subsection presents the results related to H1a-H1d, according to which preferences for ethnic and vegan food are associated with left-wing ideology, while traditional and carnivore food preferences are associated with the right.

Table 2. Variables included in each model.

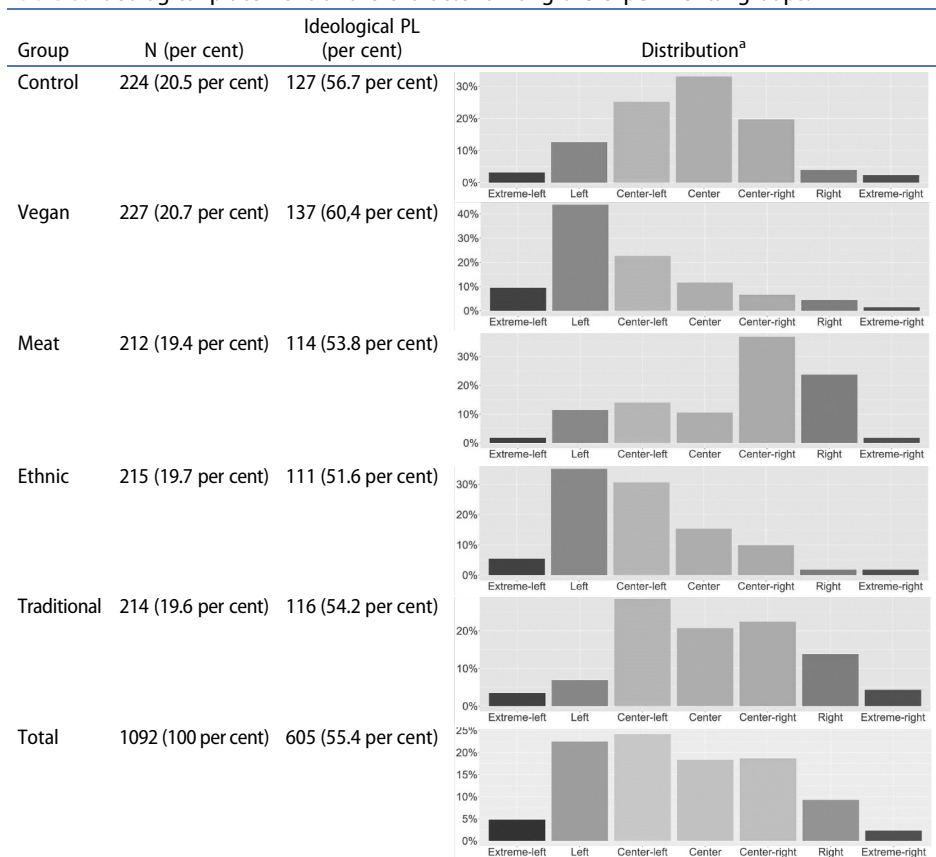
Model	1a/1b	2a/2b	3a/3b	4a/4b	5a/5b	6a/6b	1c/1d	2c/2d	3c/3d	4c/4d
iv										
<i>Ideology</i>										
<i>Located</i>										
<i>High News Exposure</i>										
<i>Cultural Consumption</i>										
<i>Affective Polarization</i>										
<i>Party Knowledge</i>										
<i>Interest in politics</i>										
<i>Socio-demographics</i>										
<i>Personality traits (Big Fives)</i>										
<i>Ideological PL</i>										
<i>Perceived Out-group</i>										

⁷ An analogous table for partisan PL is available in Supplementary Information 3.

Notably, in Table 3, we displayed the distribution of the ideological collocation of the character of the vignette as inferred by the respondent. We tested the significance of our results through Mann-Whitney U tests and t-tests (see Supplementary Information 3).

Consistent with H1a and H1c, vegan and ethnic menus are significantly associated with the political left, both with reference to the control group (as confirmed by the Mann-Whitney U tests) and to the political center (as shown by t-tests). Moreover, the association of the meat menu with the political right holds in all our tests, supporting H1b. Contrary to H1d, traditional food preferences are perceived as associated neither with the left nor the right, with the distribution concentrated toward the center of the political spectrum. This could suggest that, in Italy, traditional food preferences are associated with national identity, which transcends ideological and party-based associations. Finally, the control group is slightly skewed to the ideological left, yet both the mode and the median fall at the center of the spectrum.

Table 3. Ideological placement of the character among the experimental groups.⁷



^aAmong those who did Ideological PL.

Notice that our sample is divided into two groups: slightly more than half engaged in ideological PL based solely on information related to food choices (55.4 per cent), while the remaining part declined to do so (44.6 per cent).⁴ All experimental groups have a percentage of politicultral linkers above 50 per cent.

Respondents engaging in PL have been asked to answer an open-ended question regarding the motivations underlying their behavior. After removing blank, null, and unintelligible answers (e.g. 'Null', '...', 'xtbr'), two coders separately classified each answer according to a simple codebook made of five categories, with one of them ('Stereotype or other associations') further subdivided into four subcategories. The codebook was primarily defined ex-ante based on the literature and insights from the pilot study. However, it was flexible enough to accommodate ex-post categories inductively derived after reviewing the relatively small number of responses (491). The two coders agreed on more than 95 per cent of the classifications. Cases in which the coders were discordant were dropped from the analyses. This left us with a set of 472 comments.⁵ Descriptive results on each category, along with the category definition and examples from real answers are reported in Table 4.

Most reasons reported for PL deal with stereotypes or other associations. Stereotypes around personality are particularly relevant, followed by answers referring explicitly to the food characteristics without further elaboration.

Table 4. Results of the manual coding of open answers.

Category	Definition	Example	Number of cases (per cent)
Stereotype other associations (4 sub-categories)	Mentions some kind of stereotypical association (see below)	See below	283 (59.56 per cent)
Projection	Explicitly refers to having performed projection	<i>'Is the same menu I would have chosen'</i>	17 (3.58 per cent)
Issue	Mentions political and policy issues	<i>'Vegan people usually care a lot about the environment'</i>	91 (19.16 per cent)
Gut	Mentions concepts such as 'instinct', 'gut feelings', 'sensations' or similar.	<i>'It is an intuitive thing, it has no rational basis'</i>	63 (13.26 per cent)
Other	Anything that does not fit into other categories	<i>'So many things should be said about this ...'</i>	21 (4.42 per cent)
Subcategories of 'Stereotype or other associations'			
Economic	Mentions economic conditions	<i>'Because they are eating things that everyone can afford'</i>	26 (9.06 per cent)
Food	Mentions food characteristics	<i>'The chosen menu abundant in calories makes me imagine they lean to the right'</i>	98 (34.15 per cent)
Personality	Mentions personality or attitudes	<i>'Person with little personality. who follows the herd'</i>	154 (53.65 per cent)
Regional	Mentions Italian regions/ macroregions	<i>'Typical menu of northern Italy'</i>	9 (3.14 per cent)

⁴Respondents refusing to engage in PL were asked why they refused. The answers support the validity of our operationalization of PL. Details are provided in Supplementary Information 1.1.

⁵640 respondents engaged in ideological or partisan PL, 491 of them provided an intelligible answer to the open question.

A relevant portion of the reasons reported deals with policy issues (19.6 per cent). Projection seems to play a minor role, with only 3.6 per cent of respondents referring to it. Yet, 13.3 per cent of respondents explicitly mentioned some kind of ‘gut feeling’, which may suggest projection is more relevant than what was explicitly reported. Finally, 4.4 per cent of comments were classified as ‘other’, not falling under any of the previous categories.

To sum up, we successfully observed PL in the field of food in Italy. Moreover, vegan and ethnic eaters are perceived as left-wingers, while meat-eaters as right-wingers. We showed evidence supporting that these perceptions can explicitly arise from stereotypical associations, projection, and connections with political issues.

Ideologue, cultured, and informed: portrait of the Politicultural Linker

In this subsection, we present results related to H2-H5, investigating which individual characteristics are associated with the willingness to do PL. To present results, we report the average marginal effects (AMEs) of models 2a/2b in [Figure 2](#).⁶ Regression tables are available in Supplementary Information 4.

As we can see, self-collocation on the left-right dimension is significantly and positively associated with a higher willingness to do both partisan and ideological PL, supporting H2. People placing themselves on the left-right spectrum are predicted to be 21 per cent more likely to engage in partisan PL and 24 per cent more likely to engage in ideological PL.

Affective polarization fails to reach significance, possibly because thermometer-based indexes better grasp attitudes towards political élites than everyday partisans (Druckman & Levendusky 2019). Yet, our analyses do not support H3.

The effect of news exposure is significant, supporting H4. People spending more than 10 minutes daily consuming political news are 10 per cent more likely to do partisan and ideological PL, even controlling for political interest and the number of parties known.

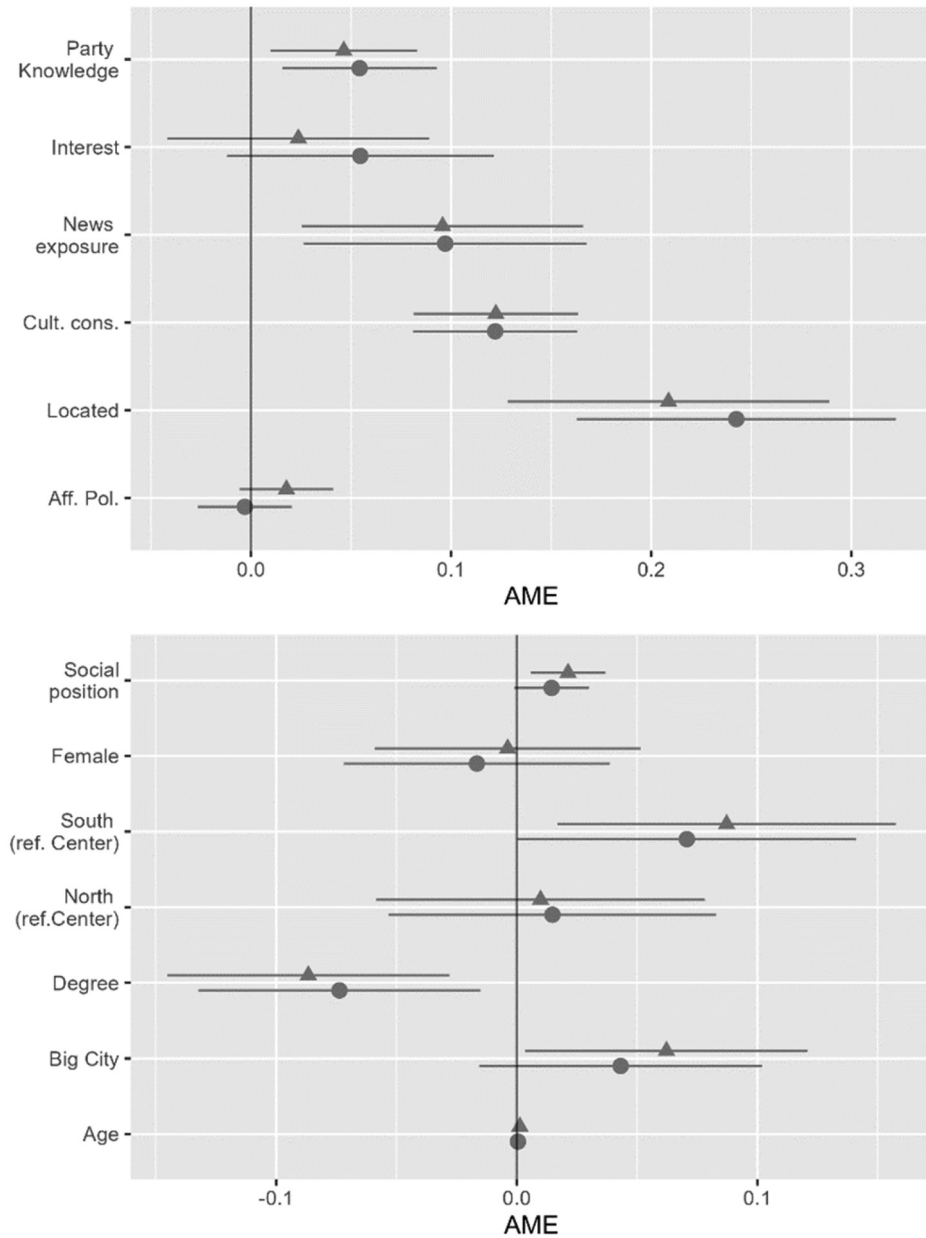
Moving to cultural consumption, people not participating in any cultural activity in the last year have a 50 per cent chance of doing PL, but this probability grows by more than 10 percentage points with every unit increase on the cultural consumption index (see also Supplementary Information 4.2). This provides support to H5.

Regarding control variables: PL is more likely among people with higher party knowledge and self-perceived social position, but also among the lower educated and southern Italians.

To better represent these results, we computed from model 2a the probability of doing partisan PL of two ‘prototypical’ kinds of people: the ‘political junkie’ - a person that self-places ideologically, is highly exposed to news media, is highly

⁶The effects of the independent variables do not change significantly in the other models. The only exception is for model 4a, where affective polarization is significant but news exposure, cultural consumption, and ideological collocation are omitted. For details, see Supplementary Information 4.

cultured, has a medium-high self-perceived social position, and lives in a big city -, and the 'apolitical' - that has been defined complementarily. All other variables have been set to their averages. According to model 2a, the political junkie has a 91 per cent chance of doing partisan PL, while the apolitical has only a 2.8 per cent chance.



AMEs for models 2a and 2b
Triangle = Partisan PL, Circle = Ideological PL, 95% C.I.

Figure 2. AMEs of the independent variables on partisan and ideological PL.

Team tofu vs bacon buddies: going from inferences to decisions

In this subsection, we start by exploring the association between PL and social interactions in the whole sample (Figure 3). Then, being interested in directional expectations on out-group/in-group dynamics (H6-H7), we focus on the subsample described in the methods section to observe the consequences of PL on the propensity to interact with members of the political out-group (H6) and expectations on the pleasantness of a political conversation with them (H7) (Figure 4). We report the predicted values for the DVs with different values of our relevant IVs in the different ordinal logistic regression models. Regression tables are available in Supplementary Information 4.

Figure 3 plots the predicted values for the three levels of *Interaction* and *Conversation* when respondents did ideological PL (circle) or did not (triangle) for models 3c/3d. Overall, these results show that performing PL is significantly associated with an increase in the propensity to accept an invitation for a coffee with the character, but not with expecting a pleasant political conversation. Specifically, ideological PL is associated with a 13 per cent increase in the probability of being 'Likely' or 'Very Likely' to accept the invitation for a coffee and a 5.5 per cent decrease in the probability of being 'Unlikely' or 'Very Unlikely'. Although the differences in the predicted values are not significant at the 95 per cent confidence level, we note that the predicted probabilities for *Conversation* among people who did and did not engage in ideological PL follow a similar pattern to those regarding *Interaction*.

As for control variables, particularly relevant are the effects of agreeableness and extraversion. We refer the interested reader to Supplementary Information 4 for a discussion. We also control for news exposure, cultural consumption, affective polarization, party knowledge, and interest in politics. Among these, only news exposure reached statistical significance in the model for *Interaction*, while interest in politics and cultural consumption reached significance for *Conversation*. Controlling for these variables accounts for a possible confounding effect of political variables on the relationship between PL and the willingness to interact or expectations on a political conversation with others. PL seems to affect *Interaction* independently of the variables associated with it in models of groups a/b.

Figure 4 refers to models 4c/4d on the subsample of respondents previously described and allows us to test the directional expectations as stated in H6 and H7. Notably, we expect interactions and political conversations with inferred members of the political out-group based on PL to be perceived by the respondents as likely to be more unpleasant and anxiety-inducing (Stephan 2014), and therefore less likely.

Figure 4 shows the predicted probability of different levels of *Interaction* and *Conversation* for people who perceive the character in the vignette to be part of the same ideological group they place themselves in and those who perceive

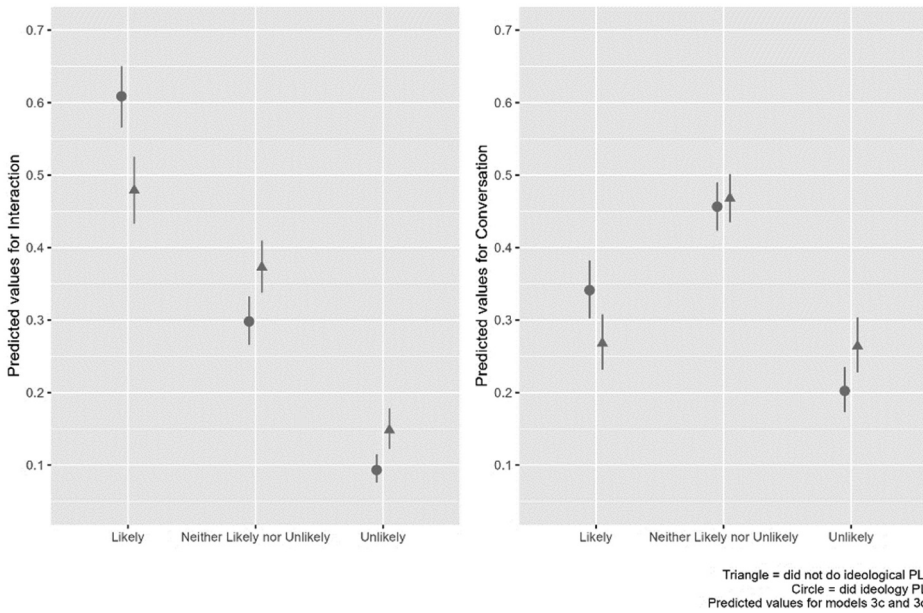


Figure 3. Predicted probabilities for the likelihood of interacting with the character (interaction – left panel) and the expectations on political conversations (conversation – right panel) for people who did and did not PL.

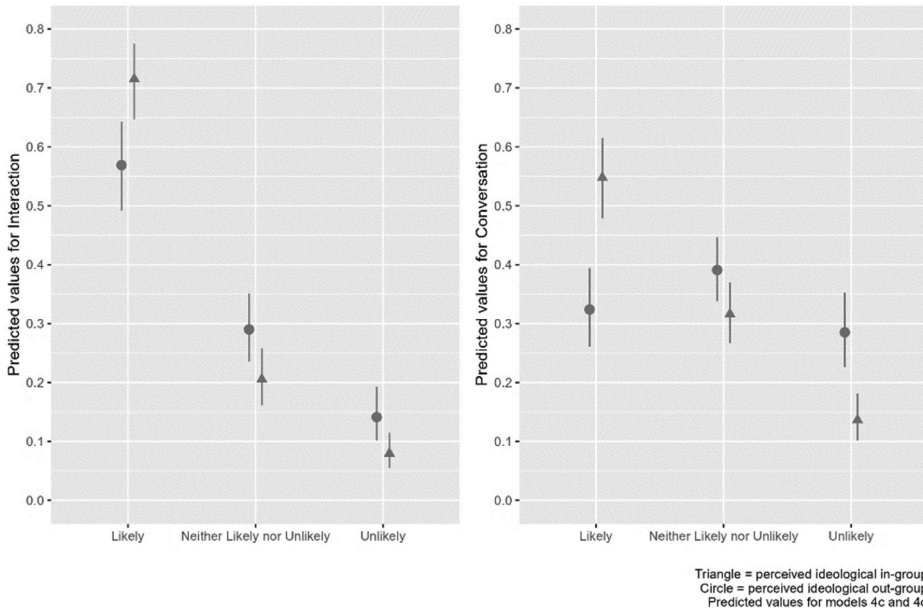


Figure 4. Predicted probabilities of interaction (left panel) and conversation (right panel) according to the perceptions of the character ideological group.

the character to be part of the opposite group. Despite the N reduction, the magnitude of the effects is particularly strong for what concerns *Conversation*. People perceiving the character as part of the in-group are 20 percentage points more prone to say that they deem 'Likely' or 'Very Likely' that discussing politics with the character will be pleasant, and 15 percentage points less prone to deem it 'Unlikely' or 'Very Unlikely'. The effects for *Interaction* are somewhat smaller, but the difference in the propensity of being 'Likely' or 'Very Likely' to interact with the character is 15 percentage points and reaches 95 per cent statistical significance.

We may reconcile this last evidence with the fact that PL increases the likelihood of interacting with others overall, as shown in [Figure 3](#), by taking into account the role of projection. People in our sample are more likely to expect the character in the vignette to be politically similar (rather than dissimilar) to them, regardless of the experimental group in which they are placed, as it is possible to appreciate in additional analyses available in Supplementary Information 4.4. Accordingly, in the subsample used for models 4c/4d, respondents are 10 per cent more likely to perceive the character as in-group rather than out-group.

In conclusion, H6 and H7 are supported. PL is positively associated with respondents' choices regarding the people they interact with overall, but when people perceive the character to be part of an adversarial ideological group (the ideological group they placed themselves in), they reduce (increase) their likelihood of engaging with them and their expectations regarding the pleasantness of a political conversation.

Discussion and conclusion

Right-wing people: lovers of traditions, good food, a glass of Italian wine, decorum, order and security.

Left-wing people: bug flours lovers, defaceers of monuments, fans of free drugs and squatting.

That's why I'm a right-wing person!(Forgnone [2023](#))

A Brothers of Italy MP published the above-reported tweet in March 2023. The tweet immediately went viral, reaching 1.6 million views. The existence and success of this tweet show a few things. First, how widely recognized is the association between food preferences and political ideologies in Italy, so much that an MP uses these as traits defining one's political identity. Second, that political élites often exploit associations like these to portray themselves consistently to the public. Other examples of this can be found in the Instagram posts displaying the Leagues' leader Matteo Salvini at a barbecue (Stagi, Benasso & Guzzetti [2022](#)), or a tabloid interview with Democratic Party secretary

Elly Schlein discussing their alternative fashion and music tastes (Campus 2023), or in the indignation that Daniela Santanché showed toward a recipe considered an insult to the Italian culinary tradition (Milano 2024). Alignments between politics and culture generate associations that are to be met by the élites to be perceived as politically consistent (Hiaeshutter-Rice, Neuner & Soroka 2023). But since such associations might also be engendered by the observations of élite behaviors, these end up strengthening stereotypes even more. The associative link between politics and culture further solidifies, with relevant societal consequences.

In this study, we first discussed the concept of PL and the mechanisms possibly engendering it, namely the observation of correlations (1), associative issue ownership (2), observation of élites (3), media representations (4), and projection (5). We then provided evidence of PL in the field of food in Italy – an understudied multi-party European context – through a survey vignette experiment. More than half of our sample is willing to infer the ideological/partisan lining of others based solely on their food consumption choices and, consistently with our hypotheses, ethnic and vegan food preferences are associated with the political left, while meaty food preferences are associated with the right. We failed to provide evidence of the association between traditional foods and right-wing ideology, possibly because national identity overshadows partisan and ideological identification in Italy. The design of this study, relying on randomization, allowed us to provide strong evidence of a causal connection between observing others' food preferences and inferring their political preferences.

Second, we found that people placing themselves in the left-right spectrum, more exposed to news media, and with higher levels of cultural consumption are more prone to do PL. We failed to show an association between affective polarization and PL. We believe further research should not discard affective polarization as relevant for PL but should resort to alternative measures to shed light on whether our null finding is due to the measurement strategy adopted. Promising results in this regard have already been found in upcoming research (Goovaerts et al. 2024), showing that indeed there is a statistical association between PL and affective polarization, but more research is needed in order to uncover the eventual causal relationship between the two. More generally, we call for more research on the possible causes and consequences of affective polarization in the southern European multi-party context. While the Spanish case, for example, has been thoroughly addressed by a special issue of South European Society and Politics (see Torcal & Comellas 2022) we believe the Italian case in particular deserves more attention.

Third, we observed that PL is associated with a change in the likelihood of interacting with others and expectations regarding the pleasantries of political conversations with them. Notably, politicultural linkers are more likely to interact with those inferred to be part of the ideological in-group compared with those inferred to be out-group members.

This latter point may have substantial implications. If, as we showed, cultural preferences are associated with political preferences and are then used to select individuals to interact with, this will likely generate fewer cross-group contacts, fueling social distance, political polarization, and misperceptions about the political out-group through self-reinforcing dynamics, with consequences for the quality of the democratic process (Levendusky & Stecula 2023; Torcal & Carty 2022). MacKuen (1990) talked about a world where the color of one's collar inadvertently signaled their partisan affiliations: blue-collar workers were assumed to be Democrats and white-collar workers to be Republicans. People used these assumptions to decide whether to interact with others or not. While today some authors suggest that social class, and therefore the color of one's collar, may not be, in contexts such as Italy, an unambiguous predictor of political preferences anymore (Cavazza & Corbetta 2015, 2016), this does not mean that outfits, diets, and other cultural preferences do not carry with them certain inadvertent political meanings. As we showed, these assumptions can affect contact between people and prevent exposure to cross-cutting conversations. The result of these dynamics could be a fragmented society, unable to find that common ground, namely those shared attributes, based on which social distance can be shortened and political polarization can be mitigated (Baliatti et al. 2021; Górski, Atkisson & Hołyst 2023).

This study is not free from limitations. First, we observed PL exclusively in the field of food. We suggest further research should study PL in other fields, such as music, movies, art, or sports. Second, while our survey experiment captures the causal association between food choice and respondent classification, it does not allow us to observe the underlying mental processes, which remain within a black box—a common limitation of randomized and survey experiments. Further research may benefit from adopting multi-method approaches, incorporating qualitative techniques like in-depth interviews and focus groups to more effectively explore the mechanisms behind PL. For example, the differences in the role of perceived similarity and subsequent projection (Ames 2004) deserve further attention. Third, and relatedly, our design allows us to make causal claims regarding the direction of PL induced by the randomized food preferences but limits us to test our theoretical expectations on the relationships between individual characteristics and the actual behavior of PL, and between PL itself and its possible social consequences through correlations. Fourth, the simplification involved in the use of a vignette could overestimate the role of the available information compared with real-life situations, where individuals are simultaneously exposed to a plurality of cues. While showing that half of our respondents are willing to infer others ideological and partisan preferences solely based on their food choices provides strong evidence of the role played by apolitical cues, further research should try to disentangle the effect of different apolitical cues on PL, for example, through conjoint experiments.

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Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Authors' contribution

G.S. conceived the idea. F.N. encouraged G.S. to investigate the topic by running a survey vignette experiment, supervised, and contributed to its design. G.S. performed the computations. F.N. verified the statistical analysis. Both G.S. and F.N. discussed the results. G.S. wrote the first draft of the manuscript with critical feedback and input from F.N. Both G.S. and F.N. contributed to shaping the research, the overall framing, and the final version of the manuscript.

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Preregistration of the study, data, and replications

The data on which this manuscript is based have been deposited in an official data archive at the following link <https://www.unidata.unimib.it/?indagine=political-inferences-from-apolitical-cues-food-based-political-inferences-in-italy-2023>. The preregistration, performed in an independent institutional registry, is available here: https://osf.io/r37zj/?view_only=1f9c13b0a9c1423ab28cc60907112f95. Moreover, at this link: https://osf.io/r37zj/?view_only=1f9c13b0a9c1423ab28cc60907112f95 the original version of the questionnaire (in Italian) and the pre-analysis plan are also stored.

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